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A Hard Line on Lithuania

President Bush is being pushed by a newly forming consensus of his advisers to prepare a dramatic means of getting supplies to Lithuania as President Gorbachev orders a boycott, just as Harry Truman beat Joseph Stalin's Berlin blockade in 1948.

That runs counter to the timidity of other NATO members, especially the Germans. Nor is that what George Bush really wants. Concerned that Soviet hard-liners are using Lithuania to undermine Mikhail Gorbachev, Bush's policy is to ease the pressure on his new superpower partner.

But warnings from his advisers are bolstered by congressional leaders of both parties who want concrete language from the president that would bind U.S. support to Lithuania. Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell agrees with his Republican counterpart, Sen. Robert Dole, that the United States may have to try helping Lithuania through the other two Baltic states, Estonia and Latvia. On NBC's "Meet the Press," Dole suggested extending them hard-currency credit that "might supply these vital needs to Lithuania" cut off by Gorbachev. In the House, sources predict a torrent of demands for postponing or canceling the summit scheduled next month in Washington.

The administration labored late last week—without decision—over exact wording to be used in a letter from Bush to Gorbachev, but the consensus was

clearly moving toward a harder line. Worried that another dose of equivocation would only embolden Gorbachev, these officials privately argued for a declaration that the United States will not accept the slow strangulation of Lithuania, just as Truman refused to knuckle under to the Berlin blockade.

Despite stark differences in the Lithuanian case, memory of Truman's response runs strong as a symbolic undercurrent inside the administration's policy talks. During the 18-month Berlin airlift, Stalin did not permit a single U.S. aircraft to be attacked as tons of food and fuel were flown to beleaguered West Berlin.

The situations, over 40 years apart, are dissimilar. Lithuanian airfields and Baltic ports are in Soviet hands, while the United States and its allies controlled West Berlin. There is one new factor: U.S. allies, lusting for business with Moscow, have become so strong that they think they can tell Uncle Sam where to get off.

That is particularly true of soon-to-be-reunified Germany. Behind the scenes, Bonn lobbied furiously to bring the Soviets into the new \$12 billion European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The United States yielded. It also overrode broad-based opposition to Soviet membership that includes conservative Republican Sen. Bob Kasten and AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland.

One key U.S. diplomat estimates that the Germans are no more interested in a free Lithuania today than they were in Lech Walesa and a free Poland nine years ago. Even as Soviet pressure was forcing martial law on Poland, the West Germans and British fought to give aid to Moscow.

Although the United States finally won out on the Polish question in 1981, Bush will face much heavier going against West Germany today if he converts handwringing into a trenchant U.S. policy toward Lithuanian independence. Bonn, while offering weak rhetorical support, wants to cut strong aid deals with the Soviets that would speak a lot louder. Bidding for European dominance, the Germans might even accept a split with the United States over Lithuania.

But Bush has the greatest power in the world and is undisputed leader of the West. This is also one crisis he could enter enjoying a united home front. Bipartisan congressional demands for an end to ambiguity are steadily pulling in supporters from across the ideological spectrum.

These politicians want Bush to lay down a marker for all the world to see, no matter how much discomfort it brings Gorbachev and his trading pals in Bonn. With the ghost of Harry Truman stalking the Oval Office, Bush may be ready to act.

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